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Benefits of Workplace Stretching Programs

Starting a stretching program in the workplace may be a new concept to many employers. Yet there is a growing number of companies worldwide that have started to make these programs part of their daily ritual. An effective stretching program can be implemented in any work environment regardless of whether you are a small business, industrial or manufacturing operation, corporate office, or construction firm. When incorporated into a comprehensive injury prevention program, stretching can benefit your organization's bottom line and promote a positive work environment.

Benefits of a Stretching Program: Employer's Perspective

The American workforce's average age is between 45 and 50 years of age and surgery numbers for the lower back, total joint replacement for the knees and hips, and shoulder surgery are at an all time high.

Workplace exercises and stretching can help prepare and condition the body for work. Repetitive work and the aging process take their toll on muscle and joint extensibility. This results in vulnerability to strains/sprains and repetitive motion problems. Stretching exercises are proven to increase tendon flexibility, develop muscle strength, improve posture, and enhance connective tissue blood flow. Other benefits include:

- Demonstrates employer commitment to health/fitness and safety
- Part of a comprehensive injury prevention program
- Improved employee morale
- Encourages personal fitness participation
- Identifies early musculoskeletal injuries
- Identifies employees with significant disabilities
- Has been shown to enhance productivity
- Motivate employees

Benefits of a Stretching Program: Worker's Perspective

Employees may come to enjoy the ritual of stretching. They may find that stretching offers many physical and mental benefits including the following:

- Increased ability to perform everyday tasks at work, home, and play
- Provides a mental break from the work routine, resulting in reduced stress
- Decreased risk of Musculoskeletal Disorders/ Cumulative Trauma Disorders injuries
- Less joint wear and tear, and reduced osteoarthritis joint stiffness and pain
- Improved reaction time, balance, and posture
- Reduced muscle fatigue and soreness
- Decreased risk of joint stiffness and/or pain to the lower back, neck, shoulders, knees, hips, elbows, wrists, and hands
- Increased energy resulting from increased blood supply and nutrients to muscles, tendons, and joints

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Scientific Support for Stretching

Numerous studies show that the risk of injury lessens with workers who stretch as part of their daily work routine. The enhanced strength demonstrated by manual handling workers who stretch (see below) is of particular interest

considering the number of workers who bend, lift, carry, pull and push, over many hours a day.

- A study with manual handling workers looked at strength training combined with stretching. (3) One group of workers received progressive resistance strength training alone, while another group received progressive strength training and flexibility stretches before and after strength training. Flexibility improved in those who performed strength training and stretching, but not in those who performed only strengthening exercises.
- Study results on pharmaceutical manufacturing employees that took part in a workplace stretching program indicated a significant increase in flexibility measurements for all body regions tested after two months of stretching. (1) In addition, participants' perception of physical conditioning, self-worth, attractiveness, and strength also increased.
- A flexibility program among municipal fire fighters evaluated the incidence, cost, and severity of joint injuries in stretchers versus non-stretchers. (2) Fire fighters who participated in the program were more flexible than non-stretchers after six months of stretching. And most compelling, the total dollars spent because of injury was \$85,372 for stretchers versus \$235,131 for non-stretchers.

Workplace Stretching Program Guidelines

It is important to understand that all methods of stretching are not created equal. Emphasis should be placed on stretching correctly in order to enhance the potential to be effective. Here are a few tips:

- Consult an occupational health practitioner for guidance in setting up a stretching program.
- Exercises should be tailored to commonly performed job duties.
- Stretching sessions should be lead by a staff member who has been trained in proper stretching techniques.
- Stretch regularly: 2-3 days/week at minimum.
- Employees with a chronic condition or an injury should obtain a doctor's approval before participating.
- Perform stretches correctly. Improper stretching can lead to further injury.
- Avoid ballistic stretching, where the individual bounces the muscle being stretched. This type of stretch has been shown to cause injury and should be avoided.
- Hold stretches for 10-30 seconds with 2-3 repetitions per muscle group.
- Intensity should be to a position of mild discomfort only.

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- 3 Genaidy, A., Delgado, E., Garcia, S., et al., Effects of a job-simulated Exercise Programme on Employees Performing Manual Handling Operations. 1994. Ergonomics. 37(1):95-106.